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People Are Not Users

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Abstract

Ethnographic methods have filtered from academia to product development, particularly in the technology industry, and into the broader 'human-centered' design practice. In the process, the ethnographic influence has entered the toolkits of other practitioners. This article argues that, despite an overall positive impact, the implementation of ethnographic methods has had less of an impact on the tendency to think of people primarily in relation to a specific product or service as "users", "customers" or "clients", which results in both a simplistic and individualistic view of human experiences. I argue that there is untapped potential in our discipline's holistic thinking as applied to our work outside of academia. One existing avenue that lends itself to translating holism into design is service design, a field of practice that shifts the focus from the design of one-off solutions (material products, digital products and others) to the design of a system of products, interactions and processes intended to serve ordinary people, often with the objective of improving their lives and well-being. These services can encompass, but are not limited to any one, digital interactions, physical products, communication materials or human interactions, and address the behind-the-scenes organizational change that must occur to support the creation and maintenance of services focused on people. Anthropologists can bring a special perspective to service design through

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their attention to understanding whole systems and, in the process, can counteract the individualism inherent in some design practices and corporate frameworks. The examples used here reflect my own experiences as the anthropologist informing service design projects.

Key words

Service Design, Innovation, Holism, Design Thinking, Human-centered Design

Introduction

Several years ago, I conducted research on the experience of ferry travelers on the Dover-Calais car ferry crossing for one of the biggest European ferry companies. The objective was to understand the needs of ferry travelers in order to improve their experience on board, from queuing, parking and wayfinding to the deck, to their experiences using the facilities on board. After a week or so of observing and interviewing passengers and staff on the ship, I had become part of its very inventory: adapting to the ebb and flow of holiday goers as they boarded for each new ferry crossing, moved around on board for the three-hour journey and departed again. When the ferry emptied itself of people and cars at either port it grew quiet while the staff cleaned up from one crossing and prepared for the next wave, I would organize my fieldnotes and change the batteries on my audio recorder. However, all this sense of a routine was thrown into stark relief when, in the middle of my second week of research, our ship was caught in a formidable storm. As the waters grew rougher, I gave up on asking passengers to show me around the ship because none of us could walk or stand confidently anymore. Even conducting interviews on the luxury travel deck was no longer an option - I was trying my best not to throw up on the bolted down red velvet lounge sofas. The ferry staff tried to assure me that this weather did not pose a threat to our lives, while simultaneously swooping up the wine and champagne glasses off the bar into the safety of lockable wooden cabinets. At the end of the night, I stumbled off the ship to my hotel, wondering if I could ever set foot on another boat. The storm had added a new layer of complexity to my role in the project: no longer just a researcher using the ship as a stage or prop for my interviews with passengers, I came to rely on the ship staff for my well-being. My success started to feel more dependent on the connections I was able to make with them. Perhaps they also started to see me less as a passenger and more as one of them. Through the experience of the storm, I also gained an appreciation of the ship, no longer as a backdrop for the research, but as a space and material object with its own agency- with the power to make its passengers feel safe or unsafe. The experience of the storm helped attune me to its very design.

Within the next day or so the storm had passed. I resumed interviews, this time with long distance truckers from Southern and Eastern Europe, whom I so far had not interacted with and whom I wasn't sure I had even seen on the ship. We sat in the tiny truck drivers' deck of the ship, crammed into a small, sterile cafeteria or stood on a frigid, windy deck chatting. I tried to impress my interviewees with the story of my Titanic channel crossing days earlier, hoping to create some camaraderie and break down some of the language barriers. They laughed generously at my attempts to regale them. The men whom I spoke to (and while there were female truckers they were not included in the research) had other issues on their mind: how to avoid the civilian passengers and find the quickest route to their dedicated truckers' deck; how to find a place to smoke and decompress; how to relate to strangers when they had been alone or in pairs for most of their long drives; and how to pass the time on the crossing and how to take a cat bath in one of the bathrooms. They complained about the food in the cafeteria being unrecognizable and those with more experience on the crossing would try to translate "shepherd's pie", "cottage pie" and "pasty" to their equivalent culinary concepts in Portuguese and Polish. Most of all, they worried about how to get back to their trucks at the end of the journey, since every minute lost in getting their freight to its destination was worth a Euro or a Zloty to their bosses.

While I had felt momentarily robbed of my basic abilities to walk, eat and converse during the storm, these men felt continuously disembodied in their experiences of boarding, spending time on and de-boarding the ships - albeit in much more subtle ways. Unlike the natural causes behind my discomfort, their feelings of alienation were exacerbated and partially caused by the very design of the ship itself. It was an unintended consequence of a lack of empathy and a missing understanding of the ferry crossing in the greater context of the drivers' lives that had resulted in this experience for them. In order to help the drivers have their needs met in the future I needed to help the people who designed future fleets of ships and those who would pay the bill for the next fleet of ships understand what it felt like to be truck driver on their ship.

In this article, I argue that capitalist design and development practices tend to reproduce a view of humans as individual atoms of agency in relation to the products and services being designed or developed. I indicate some of the negative consequences of this myth of humans as 'users' and propose some ways to counteract it from within organizations, including via service design. Service design is a design practice that tends to take a broader view of human experience than traditional frameworks for understanding humans in the context of product development and design, as well as a recognition of the importance of systems and processes in shaping human experiences. I

offer a critical review of the diffusion of ethnographic methods and anthropological thinking in design practices. Anthropology's holism and systemic thinking has untapped potential for design and provide approaches that tend to be lacking from business, government and other organizations.

The Influence of Ethnographic Methods Outside of Academia

The ethnographic method, one of the hallmarks of anthropology, has long made its way into the toolkits of other disciplines. Increasingly, adjacent fields of study have adopted empirical methods such as participant observation and deep, sustained engagement with people in their normal, everyday environments over longer periods of time. Many anthropologists view this diffusion of ethnography skeptically, pointing out the methodological problems with what others call ethnography (e.g. Howell 2017:16) and suggesting that the differences in what is practiced are so significant that some 'ethnography' practiced in other fields hardly warrants the name. Some criticisms include the observation that such fieldwork is not long-term, rigorous, grounded in ethnographic theory or informed by comparative analysis. Some have gone so far as to ask what if anything makes anthropology unique these days and worry that anthropology faces an identity crisis, at least when it defines itself so heavily through a methodological approach (see Howell 2017: 16). Yet other anthropologists have met this diffusion of the ethnographic method with approval, and, perhaps most importantly, many of those advocating for ethnographic methods and anthropological thinking in other disciplines are themselves trained anthropologists, suggesting that there is no neat division between ethnography practiced by those in anthropology departments versus ethnography practiced by those in other departments.

Anthropologists and social scientists informed by anthropological training working in business, government and non-profit organizations have witnessed a similar dispersal of their core methods outside their practice. In the manufacturing, technology, design and 'innovation'[1] industries, several pioneering business and design anthropologists carved out a niche for themselves by helping companies understand the value of studying actual customers, users, clients or beneficiaries[2] in their normal

[1] 'Innovation' is used throughout this article to refer to either incremental or large scale changes in what Wilf calls "the creation of new economic structures that can be monetized and commercialized" (2015:681); I include public sector and social innovation where it may tie back to desired cost savings rather than commercialization.

[2] I use the terms customers, users, beneficiaries or clients somewhat interchangeably throughout this article. Different industries use different terms for the people that they hope to sell to, serve or otherwise impact. Organizations selling a product or service tend to talk about 'customers', organizations selling software tend to think of these people as 'users'. Non-profit and public sector

everyday environments (for a full analysis of the early days of business anthropology see Jordan 2003; Wasson 2000: 379-382). Many of those advocating for more ethnographic approaches included practitioners trained in adjacent disciplines such as psychology (Wasson 2000: 381-382).

Until this point, doing research with customers, usually under the name of 'market' or 'consumer' research, had been confined to survey methods (either by mail or in person), bringing people into a lab or office building in small numbers for 'focus groups' or conducting one-on-one interviews, usually in a similar 'lab' or meeting room setting or in public spaces. These encounters were quite tightly scripted and strictly time constrained. The interests of business stakeholders heavily dictated the questions asked and behaviors observed. The emphasis of this early research was to understand the market opportunity for new products, who would buy them and how much they might pay, not what the product should be in the first place.

Those inspired by academic ethnography often worked as organizational anthropologists within organizations to research corporate cultures. Others advocated for a deeper engagement with consumers by going "into the field" and studying people in their ordinary home or work environments. By spending time with customers, in the customers' normal environments, and by watching them engage with a product, sometimes even bringing their business stakeholders with them, they contributed to a shift in thinking. Instead of business executives dictating decisions "from the top", product decisions have increasingly been derived, at least in part, from research with users, with empirical data helping shape product development and directions alongside organizational priorities, from the bottom up. I am not suggesting that altruistic motives necessarily spurred this transition. Instead, it is now common understanding that research with users and customers results in positive impacts on the "bottom line" because products and services built on observed customer desires and challenges will have a greater success rate in the market compared to those dreamt up solely in a lab or board meeting.

The path I have traced so far speaks mostly to anthropological work in the for-profit segment of the economy. The goals of non-profit organization and government organizations are undoubtedly different, and the trajectory and impact of anthropologists working in those areas is a different one with a history that I will not trace here (see Wasson, et al. this issue). The objective of many non-profits is improving well-being of humans and reducing human suffering, while that of governments is to

organizations may think of these people as 'beneficiaries', 'clients' or, if they serve all the people in a jurisdiction, 'citizens'.

serve the wide range of needs of its citizens. While neither tends to have revenue targets, they usually share the obligation to spend public money responsibly and, especially, in capitalist societies, to spend less. Anthropologists have been involved in pursuing such goals by conducting the research required to deliver the programs, services and projects required by non-profits and governments to reach their goals, both to inform new programs and to evaluate existing ones. The social innovation field is one in which for-profit, government and non-profit organizations and motives intersect.

I return to one for-profit sector in particular: technology and the 'innovation' field, because this is where the dissemination of anthropologically inspired ideals is most pervasive, and perhaps most surprising. The technology field has perhaps most fully embraced the notion of understanding and serving 'user' needs first and aligning businesses' priorities around users' desires and motivations. The field of User Experience (UX) grew out of the realization that technology had the potential to solve many problems, including making information accessible, creating greater efficiency in communication, and making human life and work more efficient, but that the complexity of technology's affordances needed to be simplified in order that humans could interact with it. For that, organizations needed people who could understand human behavior and could speak to how humans would interact with technology "on the ground". Hence the rise of "human-centered" design and the growth of a new class of specialists: designers and researchers who translate human needs into solutions. Design Anthropology is a term used, mostly by design anthropologists themselves, to describe anthropological thinking, influence and methodological impact in the design space.[3]

While I trace the spread of anthropologically inspired methods in industry, it is worth noting just some of the major differences between academic and applied ethnographic methods in industry (see also Wasson 2000). Because of the shorter time-cycles in which industry research must occur ethnographic methods are much more scripted and occur in shorter timeframes than academic ethnography. While a typical academic ethnographic fieldwork period lasts months to years (with the shorter, months-long ethnographic work usually building on longer stretches of field research that happened prior or repeated visits "to the field" accumulating over time), industry ethnographic methods tend to involve fieldwork of a few weeks, very occasionally spanning to last a few months. Ethnographers in industry have spent much time debating the extent to

[3] For a discussion on teaching design anthropology in a University setting via an experimental classroom project, and a discussion of my own personal and professional trajectory, in which I have spanned the academic/applied anthropology divide, see Hale 2016.

which such research approaches are "ethnographic" enough.[4]

Research outputs in industry tend toward media that can be assembled quickly and allow for rapid distribution across different kinds of teams within in an organization, compared to more traditional academic knowledge sharing methods such as conferences, journal articles and monographs. As Wasson has noted (2000: 285) these time pressures on research tend to result in shorter analysis cycles, with a priority for speed over rigor. At the same time, compared to ethnography as practiced in academic departments, ethnographic methods in applied fields including outside of academia, tend to rely on, and require more collaboration, between different practitioners, perhaps led by a research specialist or an ethnographic specialist working with other research specialists.

Another difference, albeit a difference in degree, rather than a difference in kind, is between the objectives underlying academic versus industry research. Industry ethnographers rarely have the opportunity to do truly exploratory and ethnographic research for its own sake, or research for the sake of constructing new knowledge about the world, in which there are no expectations for the results to have an immediate impact on producing change. Even the most open-ended industry research has the objective of identifying a "problem-space" that eventually will be targeted with a "solution". Ethnographers in academia working in applied disciplines also tend toward the practical end of the spectrum of research objectives, developing knowledge to contribute to solutions for social or organizational problems.

For those practicing ethnographic methods outside of academia, this solution (but rarely the research contributions to that solution), unsurprisingly, obeys the quantified and monetized logic of the organizations that will need to bring it into being. In business, and in government and non-profits, solutions need to be measured tangibly: in revenue generated, resources saved or using other metrics (clients benefitted, time saved, or new subscribers). Inevitably, researchers working in this context are forced to justify their research and resource needs either proactively or retrospectively in terms of their potential contribution to a solution. This is difficult to do, given the near impossibility of quantifying research efforts and results and the difficulty in linking research directly to solutions produced.

In its solution focus, ethnographic research in these industry fields tends to be heavily constrained, at least from the perspective of the researcher (even if stakeholders may experience it as frustratingly

[4] From an applied research perspective, the term "ethnographic" to refer to such methods, indicates its lineage from traditional, full scale ethnography, and is a helpful differentiator from other methods precisely for the reasons given earlier.

ambiguous). The degree to which assumptions are made from the outset of a project, and the extent to which research design constrains the results of what researchers research, is perhaps no higher in industry ethnographic research than in academic ethnographic research. However, such parameters, in my experience, are not acknowledged to the same degree in industry. One of the contributions researchers trained in the social sciences can bring to industry is in highlighting the assumptions and constraints imposed by a research design and by extension can lend a critical perspective on the business objectives and business practices which tend to give rise to research objectives.

Academic anthropology can be one or several steps more removed from any "problem-solving". Due in part to anthropology's roots in projects of colonialism much of modern anthropological history entails a deliberate distancing from any immediate endeavor to materially alter the lives of those studied. Regardless of which historical tradition (e.g. British 'social' anthropology or American 'cultural' anthropology) a particular kind of anthropology comes from, it tries to foreground an explanation of the present state of things, rather than a mission to directly alter it. For many their primary sense of responsibility is to depict the lived experiences of the communities they work with, and to expose, explain and elucidate structural forces that contribute to their marginalization (where their subjects are marginalized). Nevertheless, in anthropology's ability to not just describe the world, but also explain how it works, lies its power for producing change. Academic anthropologists are not per se averse to positively impacting the conditions of some of those they study, where those people are historically marginalized. Whether they are engaged in public scholarship, activist anthropology or teaching new generations of thinkers, anthropologists tend to question the forces that marginalize some people and maintain the power that few hold over many.

Historically, academic anthropologists working in anthropology departments have been expected to, and sought to maintain independence from organizations, for-profits, governments or non-profits that have vested interests in altering the ways of life of the people they study. Of course, they are hardly immune to constraints on their research, and research topics are shaped by a competition for scarce funding. Research topics and objectives are shaped as much by available funding and the prospect for funding as the need to make strategic decisions about research topics that will contribute to specific existing and emergent research trends. These constraints apply to all researchers but are perhaps most restricting to early career researchers.

Returning to ethnographers working in industry, a more sustained engagement with customers, one that occurs *in situ*, is one of the hallmarks of anthropological influence in industry human research methods. A couple of others are worth pointing out. Empathy has become

a ubiquitous concept in the world of business of late (e.g. Goleman et al. 2017). In business, the idea is that organizations will be more profitable and sustainable, including producing greater revenue and more innovative products, if the people who make up those organizations and design those products try to step into the shoes of their co-workers, their employees, and their customers. Anthropologists working in the fields of design, technology and organizational change have played a role in the spread of "empathy" as a key business concept. They have, for instance, challenged the idea that engineers know how a tax compliance software should work and have advocated for the practice of sending researchers "into the wild" and sitting down with real accountants to design technology solutions for those users.

The idea of going to users, of creating empathy with them and of using that understanding to drive product decisions spread from anthropologists and the anthropologically minded to other professionals and became a more instituted approach. These sorts of ideas and methods have become formalized in practice philosophies such as 'Design Thinking' and 'Human-centered design' (for an ethnographic account and anthropological critique of the Design Thinking method, albeit without a discussion of the research methods often associated with the method, see Wilf 2015, 2016). Such philosophies have all but assimilated a core tenet of ethnography, namely that by creating empathy with ordinary people through real-life interactions with them our knowledge of those people is enhanced and the solutions created will be more authentic and ultimately, more successful.

To give an example of this assimilation of ethnography into the standard UX toolkit, most job descriptions for UX researchers now list ethnography as a desired skill, alongside many others. There are far fewer positions that list the title ethnographer or anthropologist in the title, while the UX researcher is becoming a more well known role in the Tech industry. Increasingly, I see even designer roles requiring experience with "ethnographic methods". Beyond its buzzword status in design and UX departments and its influence on product development ethnography has of late ascended even higher, to the boardroom where several authors argue that it should be part of business strategy influencing broader organizational goals and practices beyond products or solutions (Anderson 2009, Beers 2014, Hasbrouck 2015). Another influence of anthropological thinking is the increasing importance of storytelling, the conveyance of knowledge through narrative accounts beyond purely descriptive or numbers driven reporting.

The influence of ethnographic thinking in business is remarkable, even if it is not often overtly attributed to anthropology or anthropologists. Despite all these successes, however, ethnography in business has not been able to remedy one particular thought trap: the proclivity for imagining people first and foremost as 'users', 'customers'

or 'clients'. In the next section, I will explain this thought trap with the help of the story of a woman called Sophie.

The Law of the Instrument

Let us step back in time to the late 2000s into the home of Sophie,[5] a single mother of five children ranging between the ages of around 6 and 16, living in a mid-sized town in Kent County, Southern England. Kent is a relatively wealthy, conservative county outside London, but one with pockets of deep poverty (for the full report from which this story stems see Parker, Pharoah and Hale 2008). Sophie and I were in her kitchen when she showed me the lock on her freezer. It was intended to keep the five hungry kids out, a way of spreading the consumption of frozen foods over a longer period of time in order to protect the family food insurance for days when she could not afford fresh groceries. Sophie herself had already cut down substantially on her own food intake and had switched to cheaper, mostly carbohydrate rich foods. This was just one way to make her meager income, a combination of child support, benefits payments and odd jobs go farther. It is one example, perhaps one of the more extreme ones, of the multiple ways of managing extremely limited funds available to these families.

Sophie had separated from her husband a few years earlier and was experiencing the devastating financial consequences that women tend to bear the brunt of in divorce from heterosexual marriages. One of Sophie's children was on the autism spectrum, another had been the victim of sexual abuse, and she herself had suffered at the hands of an emotionally abusive husband. Sophie was the recipient of a few government services intended to alleviate a variety of her family's circumstances. We had spent most of my two-day visit dragging the kids along to various appointments and offices and making various frustrating phone calls with service providers. In each of these phone calls, Sophie was seen as the recipient, customer or beneficiary of the particular service that provider offered. At the school, she was the mother of a troubled teenager. At the legal aid office, she was a divorced mother struggling to get her husband to pay child support. On the phone to the benefits department, she was the recipient of income support and tax credits.

I met Sophie while conducting research for Kent County Council, the local government, while working for an organization now called Revealing Reality.[6] Kent County Council was interested in exploring new ways to help families such as Sophie's: families who received some government services but who, on the whole, were just out of reach of most of the services available to them, either deliberately or

[5] Sophie is a pseudonym.
[6] Formerly ESRO.

unintentionally. The effect on Sophie was that each of the services she dealt with treated her as a user only of the services it provided without any regard, indeed seemingly ignorant, of other services that were provided to her. All of the families we spoke to quickly became experts on learning about and managing their relations with different organizations and service providers, and developed sophisticated ways of managing benefits in ways that helped them most. Strategies included changing the frequency of benefit payments to sharing tips and ideas with other benefits recipients in places like school playgrounds and sharing knowledge of how to make applications and appeals. In all cases families sought to obtain the knowledge that would allow them the most control over their benefits and allow them to plan for emergencies and setbacks which could cause disproportionate harm to them.

However, while our research revealed the agency of the families we studied it also showed the systemic and structural limitations of that agency and some of the unintended consequences of those systems and structures. To give one example, the tax credit system, one of the main sources of income for most of the families, was also a major source of difficulty. This is because all the families we worked with had been affected by accidental overpayments of tax credits, resulting in a need for families to repay. The causes for these overpayments could be administrative errors or changes in a family's circumstances and delays to the processing of those changes, or agencies not communicating with each other about the changes. To give an example of the devastating effects of even small overpayments: if a family received £5 more each week than they were eligible for, this would make only a minor impact on the weekly budget and would be spent meeting basic needs. However, by the time the mistake was detected, a bill which attempted to reclaim the overpaid benefit money could amount to 52 x £5 = £260. Such a sum would be completely unmanageable for most families. In some instances agencies attempted to help families by deducting the overpaid benefit from subsequent payments each week, but a deduction of that amount from each weekly payment in the following year would make budgeting more difficult again. While there were some systems in place for protecting families, families had little control over such errors.

In the introduction to this article, I described the situation of long distance truck drivers on the ferry ship. The truck drivers and families like Sophie's share an important predicament: both were being understood and targeted by the organizations trying to make their lives better in a one-dimensional way as 'users' of a service. Furthermore, this way of understanding them stripped them of their rich social, cultural and intellectual lives, the narratives they were performing and challenging, the meanings they were creating and their vibrant social fabrics. I would venture to argue that all of us appear in a similarly one-dimensional and individualistic view to the organizations and companies we come into

contact with daily.

By the very nature of their existence, organizations that create, design, sell products, programs or services tend to think narrowly of the people who are to buy, benefit from or otherwise use what these organizations create. Organizations are predisposed to thinking of the people for whom their products are designed in relation to the product, policy, or service they have built or are about to create. The main goal of the imagined individuals in such situations is to purchase, use or otherwise engage with the primary product(s) or service(s) created by the organization. This reductionism is partially effective. Without a doubt, it is this laser focus that allows organizations to funnel resources - human and material - toward making those products or services, and putting in place the systems needed to actualize such plans. In the context of limited resources (whether the limitation is real or imagined) keeping the end-users of a service or product in mind, those who are to exchange money for it, helps reduce costs and get to the end goal more quickly. This consumerist narrative transpires to government and non-profit organizations: here the goal is not to obtain and increase revenue but to save money or provide value that translates into money saved (for example because less staff are required to meet that need) or another quantifiable value. Private companies need customers, public sector organizations need citizens and non-profits need clients in order to exist. In the eyes of most organizations, most humans are either actual users, non-users or proto-users of their particular product or service. This narrative allows boards and teams to decide whether to build a product or not, how to market it, and to make sense of their success or failure in the market.

Research in most organizations, whether market, consumer, user, design or other human-centered research, often reproduces and reinforces such reductionism and individualism. Human-centered research projects in industry, as in most of academia (though perhaps not anthropology), are measured by, commissioned and executed using a metric of number of individuals interviewed or studied. Research in most organizations is seen as a cost or expense, and the monetization of research, (whether it is conducted by employees or by an external research partner) is often based on the number of people who are to be studied and the number of researchers required. This is especially true for qualitative research methods used to evaluate product concepts and prototypes and in their testing. Most research I have sold, commissioned or conducted has been measured and valued in part by how many individuals were interviewed or observed. Incidentally, this way of thinking also contributes to the notion that qualitative research with deeper engagement with users or customers is more expensive. In applied 'ethnography', researchers spend a lot of time with few 'users'. It compares unfavorably to research methods that can capture the

'experiences' of many users in a shorter amount of time. An applied ethnographic research project might spend a day or two with one 'user' and their social circle, but an interview-based project can cram 6-8 user testing sessions or interviews into one day.

Regardless of the origins of this tunnel vision, the problem is that it is both inaccurate and that it can have negative consequences for the humans involved. The deeper root of the 'people as users' myth lies in capitalist ideology itself. The aspect that I want to focus on here is capitalism's individualist offshoot, which goes hand in hand with its ideology and practice. Treating people as 'users' over-relies on individualism as a way to understand humans. Such inherited beliefs are not only reductionist, viewing humans mostly for how they purchase or engage with a specific product or program, but are also individualizing, reducing people to independent atoms of agency. Viewing people primarily as 'users' strips them of the rich social relationships that define them more than their situationally specific consumer, user or client role. An objection to this observation might be that we live in an individualist society and that corporate "individualism" and research from corporations simply reflects that we live in a society that tends to assume that individuals are the most fundamental units of our society. Nevertheless, by the very methods researchers in such organizations choose they can reinforce or challenge the myth of complete individualism.

Individualism is a defining characteristic of life in Western capitalist societies. However, individualist ideologies and practices never occur in isolation, nor are they the necessary end-point of transition in a capitalist society. This relates to a central tenant of anthropology and a fundamental insight anthropology provides on life in modern, industrialized societies: just as modern politics is not separate from the domestic concerns of kinship, modern economics is shaped by myth as much as by money. Robbins, in his recent re-reading of Dumont's work on individualism, writes that Dumont stressed that "because human life is in reality social, individualism must always be found in combination with holism", and no society has ever been fully individualist. Robbins argues that rather than examining two wholly distinct kinds of societies, we should "be looking at divergent developments of values that hold between social formations that in fact share a fundamental commitment, recognized or not, to holism. Furthermore, if the work of individualism, where it is a value, is never finished, then individualist formations must of necessity be dynamic ones—ones in which individualism struggles to gain ground, producing social and ideological movement as it sometimes advances and sometimes retreats from domains it endeavors to organize" (2015: 174).

Precisely these tensions between individualist ideology and non-individualist tendencies, between individualist narratives and non-

individualist myths were at play in the research I conducted with families such as Sophie's. One of the assumptions we found among policy-makers and those delivering services to families was the idea that individual choices, and laziness, had led to these families' circumstances and that individual choices were the solution to some of their problems. Simultaneously, another prevailing narrative among these same people was a version of the "culture of poverty" myth. Families like Sophie's supposedly lacked the capacity to make financially sound decisions due to an acquired proclivity for self-destructive habits, inherited false beliefs about the world and that they were in a collective downward spiral of misery passed on through generations from parents to children. Aside from the tension between these two, apparently contradictory ways of understanding the families, the delivery mechanisms designed to benefit these families treated them largely as individual agents.

One of the contributions that anthropologists can bring to society-at-large is to draw attention to the interconnected aspects of human experience in spite of individualist narratives and values that disguise that experience. In this case, the most positive impact from our work came from two efforts: first, bringing stories from the families, stories emphasizing agency and revealing the interconnected aspects of their situations. Second, we provoked change in the minds of those people designing services and created connections among the different agencies providing services in order to benefit families. In this case, service design was used as a tool to bring holistic thinking to the organization. While service design is certainly not the only way (Hasbrouck uses the term "ethnographic thinking" in a similar vein, 2015), it is a field of practice that uses a language that some organizations already speak or can readily understand.

Service Design: A Case Study

The origins of service design and its practical applications have been well documented by others (Stickdorn and Schneider 2010, Polaine et al. 2013). My purpose here is to show that anthropological thinking has a special affinity to the premises of service design, namely its more holistic approach to human experiences compared to other design approaches, and that service design can help with the individualist bias contained in the 'people as users' myth.

Service Design is the development of services to improve ease of use, satisfaction, loyalty and efficiency across environments, communications, products and people. Within the design industry and design practice, service design shifts the perspective from the design of *things* and one-off *interactions* to so-called "end-to-end" experiences. It can encompass the traditional objects of design such as physical products, digital interfaces, graphic communication, signage and wayfinding, as well

as the design of whole systems of interactions that can include all of the above, as well as the human, offline and non-digital interactions of everyday life. Service design tends to address both "front of the house" and "back of the house" processes; it tries to shape both the experience of customers or beneficiaries but also the business processes and organizational change needed to support an effective service. Most service design projects start with qualitative research that engages in a deeper more sustained approach to the future users or beneficiaries of a service. Because service design aims to improve not just one interaction or product, but tries to create a system of products and interactions it tends to take a much broader perspective to data. For example, if a medical clinic were to engage in a service design project it might have researchers follow a patient from their home where they booked an appointment on the phone or a website, to arrival at the clinic, waiting in the waiting room, to interactions with front desk staff and nurses and doctors, and back home again. It would also seek to understand the clinic on its own terms and involve research and observation of the clinic itself over one or multiple days. Service design assumes that humans do not interact with products, services and other humans in isolation, but that all the interactions go together to form a journey or experience. Service design teams tend to have a broader representation of types of design professionals and can include dedicated researchers, technologists, graphic and communication designers, product and industrial designers, branding and marketing professionals, business strategists, customer support or success teams, sales and others. Typically, service design projects, because they span several organizational departments, are accountable to and view as their stakeholders, individuals who are higher up in the organization.

Of course engaging in a service design project is not an inoculation against individualism or treating humans primarily as users, customers or beneficiaries. Service design's hallmark in the discipline of design and design research is not necessarily a non-individualist research focus but the broader range of solutions proposed. Many service design projects take as their research subjects the same individuals that 'user' or 'consumer' research starts with. Equally important, just like any other design or 'innovation' discipline, service design is not immune to other critiques that have been leveled against design in general. Wilf's ethnographic account of 'innovation' practices, though not specifically about service design, highlights the problems with the design discipline's obsession with 'Post-It notes' and brainstorming, activities which tend to result in the decontextualization of what he calls "pseudo-data" gleaned often out of air (2016:736-741), and ambiguous to the point that they can be interpreted in any of a multitude of ways, without any accountability to normal research methods or practice. He also describes a proclivity toward "ritual insight": the attribution of validity to ideas simply because they are placed on a recognized visual template or framework that has

pre-existing prestige or capital (2016:741-747), rather than any objective merit. Service design can suffer similar problems where it is underpinned by no or sub-par research. Service design also obeys the broader capitalist logic of the design field from which it stems, and is subject to the same pressures as other design disciplines. Wilf, in his critical ethnography of business innovation practices writes that:

> One dimension of the transition to flexible accumulation that has not received as much scholarly attention as these technologies is what Harvey has described as "an acceleration in the pace of product innovation together with the exploration of highly specialized and small-scale market niches" (Harvey 1990:156). Flexible accumulation depends not only on reduction of the turnover time of capital via more efficient production and distribution technologies but also on the faster generation of ideas for new products and services (2016:732).

Service design is not inherently immune to these constraints. Furthermore, service design, like any design discipline, can be leveraged for a broad range of purposes and organizations and with varying outcomes. It is not an inherently ethical or un-ethical endeavor. Anthropologists engaged in service design must go through the same process of carefully considering project objectives and the working practices of the organization that is funding the project (see also Wasson 2000:378) to decide whether and how to engage.

My argument is that service design is, at least theoretically, compatible with a broader anthropological lens on a more multitudinous, complex landscape of experiences and interactions in the lived reality of people. Service design looks at multiple interactions that individuals experience as well as the 'front' (publicly visible) and 'back' (internal organizational) relationships and processes that take place or should take place to create systems supporting more holistically designed experiences or journeys. As a result, because it also seeks to take into account and to affect the organizational processes and structures that underpin 'services', it affords a more holistic perspective that can provide a natural fit for anthropological thinking.

In order to explain the potential impact of service design and how an anthropological mindset can help, I would like to return to the project mentioned earlier, involving low-income families in Kent County. The research I conducted with my colleague Robin Pharoah revealed the multiple ways in which families such as Sophie's were adapting to and coping with broad systemic problems through complex social interactions and relationships. It also uncovered the negative impact of some well-intended government services on these relationships, as well as the persistent and pervasive effect of stigma. Most importantly, the research revealed some of the intricate and complex financial skills of low-income

families and pointed to the extreme resilience in the face of nearly unsurmountable challenges. It also showed that none of the agencies providing services to Sophie and her children were talking to each other, and that she had to do a great deal of cognitive shifting when dealing with each; she encountered each provider as a user of that particular service.

We partnered with a London service design agency, Engine, to conduct research into the everyday lives of Kent families and how they interacted with council services. We delivered a series of collaborative workshops with Kent policymakers, other civil servants, social workers, teachers and local business owners to generate new ideas for improving services to this population. Kent County had already started work to restructure and innovate on its policy design and delivery practices by creating a new team, a think tank, within the county government called the Social Innovation Lab Kent. The title of our report "Just Coping" signaled a shift in language for the council and its understanding of some of its citizens. Many of those designing and delivering policies and programs for these families had seen these families as victims, both of the poverty cycle and of their own alleged "culture" of poverty. Anxieties about large numbers of people lying in application forms to illegally claim benefits, what the popular press in the UK calls "benefit scroungers", also lay simmering under the surface of many of our early conversations. Our research allowed policy makers and others to think about these families as having agency within their predicaments and executing that agency in relation to government agencies, other families, businesses and non-profits. Policy-makers were able to reframe their approaches taking into account both the perspective of those families and the interconnectedness of families, organizations and institutions.

The impact of this kind of research and the service design methods implemented by the team was far-reaching. Some of the projects that resulted from this service design engagement included the following:

- A new, streamlined benefit application and delivery system. In the past, Kent families had received services from a range of different departments and agencies; each engaged with and understood families as recipients of their service alone. Many families had no idea of the full range of services they could benefit from and the stigma of being a recipient of services prevented many from applying in the first place, which in itself was an overwhelming bureaucratic procedure. The lack of communication between agencies had also resulted in the overpayment of benefits referenced earlier, and when families were asked to pay them back, put them in a dangerous reliance on loan sharks.
- This system also required a closer collaboration between different government agencies and a new way of sharing information in order to allow families maximum access to programs as well as to

help avoid the devastating effects of benefit overpayment.

- In conjunction with the initiative above, the council created physical one-stop service shops where families could be connected to a range of services and where a human navigator could help connect them to the services.
- It also led to several innovative partnerships between the council, local non-profits and local businesses, such as shared bulk-shopping programs to help families access the heavy discounts associated with bulk-grocery shopping (which requires a higher upfront investment) and a project to engage fathers more actively in parenting.

A holistic ethnographic research approach and a design method that took into account all aspects of Kent families' social lives and interactions with government, businesses and non-profits, and that sought to impact the assumptions and established working methods within the organization, delivered the best outcomes for Kent County Council and for the families we worked with. It helped expose and combat the social isolation these families were dealing with, much of it a consequence of the individualist biases that accompany the cultural logic of late capitalism. Much of the change that was experienced was driven by a recognition of the existing potentials and affordances of existing social relationships, re-arranged, supported and systematized through new, government sponsored programs.

Humanity-Centered Design and Design Anthropology as a Form of Engaged Anthropology

Anthropologists working outside of academia face some particular ethical dilemmas. Arguably, their tools are sometimes used to further the interests of businesses, governments and other organizations with considerable power over ordinary people and with disproportionate power over the disenfranchised. The work that anthropologists and the anthropologically minded employed by such organizations produce may sometimes increase the power differential between those who are studied and those who benefit from the studies directly. However, several anthropologists have challenged the idea that anthropological work, particularly in the design field, is inherently unethical compared to academic research (Cefkin 2009, Hale 2016, Ladner 2014). Cefkin and Ladner both speak to the impossibility of separating market activity and profit motives completely from academic research (Cefkin 2009:2; Ladner 2014). Ladner points out that academic anthropologists can stand as much to gain personally as anthropologists working in industry; however, applied anthropologists also contend with an aggregate gain for their companies or organizations. I have argued that as anthropologists we have the choice whether to stand by as others engage in the field of

"designing", creating the systems in which we live, or whether to help shape that process (2016: 211). Here, I would like to go a step further and suggest that anthropologists can and should effectively work from within organizations to hold them accountable to general human interests, minimize the risk of harm and help make life better for ordinary people.

For those of us who are willing to engage with some of these organizations despite their flawed parameters, we are forced to think about how else, other than through our ethnographic research, we can do so. You may argue that good ethnography is always holistic; it takes into account the complex interrelationships between people and between different aspects of social life including the organizations and structures within which they live. You would be right. However, being right about ethnography, in my experience, has had very little impact on the people and organizations that I have tried to influence. Service design offers one possible vehicle for holistic thinking for innovation purposes.

Anthropologists, with their emic perspective and careful observation of ordinary people's everyday experience, practices and meaning-making activities, and their ability to create empathy through story-telling have a unique vantage point for appealing to the imagination of those in power. I have argued that some distinctive benefits of anthropological thinking have long been undervalued in the business world, compared to the relative success of other anthropological perspectives that have percolated through industry in the form of empathy and more sustained and deep engagement with humans. In particular, anthropology's holistic thinking has not been leveraged to its fullest potential. The holistic perspective that anthropological thinking offers, and the discipline of service design, which creates a structure for this kind of thinking and doing, can provide value to organizations and to the humans they mean to serve. Anthropologists can provide repeated, timely reminders that as humans, we operate not as individuals in our consumer encounters, but as part of large networks and in interrelated systems involving people who cannot be reduced to 'users'.

In her critique of the design and innovation fields, Suchman writes, "A critical anthropology of design, in the end, must begin by problematizing the taken-for-granted terms of the profession, including... innovation and the ideas that are taken as its foundation." (2016:754). Suchman sees the relationship between anthropology and design as inherently opposed, with design and innovation as problematic objects for anthropology to study, and where anthropology's main job is to "articulate the cultural imaginaries and micropolitics that delineate design's promises and practices" (2011:3). Within this project there is, in her mind, little room for what she calls "a reinvented anthropology *as* (or for) design" (2011: 3). Wilf, by contrast, building on Suchman's critique, has argued that anthropology *for* design and a critical anthropology *of* design can be productively combined (2016: 735). This article has sought

to expose some fruitful territory in that intersection of the anthropology for design and anthropology of design. Through the examples provided, it has suggested that the holistic thinking that anthropology provides can be used to expose the assumption of people 'as users' and the individualist underpinnings of such a myth. Furthermore, the insights can be used to inform new solutions and designs that are built on a different source of truth and a recognition of how people and organizations are inextricably linked. Service design is a vehicle that lends itself to anthropology's holistic method because it seeks to influence both the products and services and the very organizations that create them. Design anthropology presents itself both as a potential form of engaged anthropology and a way to help the design field become not just human, but humanity-centered.

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